

Good afternoon, Chairman Kurtz and the members of the Families, Children and Seniors Standing Committee. My name is Jan Wagner and I appreciate the opportunity to address the Committee as an adoptive Grandmother, the Kinship Chair of the Michigan Association of Foster, Adoptive, and Kinship Parents, and as a member of the Michigan Kinship Coalition.

I am here specifically to address the impact of HB 4649 on the approximately 4,500 children who are living in kinship families under the oversight of the Michigan Department of Human Services. The majority, sixty percent, of these placements are listed as unlicensed relative placements.<sup>1</sup> The reasons that families may not be licensed are varied but may include an intense distrust of a system that has frequently let them down when they have previously reached out for help. Licensed relative families also face innumerable challenges in working within the Child Welfare framework. For that reason, I would like to make the following statements and requests:

1. HB 4649 needs to clarify that **all** families, including unlicensed relative caregivers, under the responsibility of the Department are eligible for the rights and redress outlined in the legislation.
2. Under Section 8A(2)(A) the legislation needs to clarify that **unlicensed** relative caregivers are ***treated with dignity, respect, trust, and consideration***. I have heard repeatedly from relative caregivers that both private agency and DHS workers tell them that the children will be removed from their care and placed in foster care if the relative caregiver does not cooperate with the worker or questions the worker regarding actions in the case.
3. Under Section 8A(2)(C) the legislation needs to clarify that **unlicensed** relative caregivers are provided with the same access to ***necessary trainings and supports*** that are available to licensed families. It should be pointed out that sometimes families are not being licensed because workers, again both private agencies and DHS workers, are not assisting caregivers in accessing the items necessary to become licensed. A specific example is a grandmother who was told that in order to become licensed she must have beds for the children. She was not informed that there were support funds available to help with the purchase of the beds, thereby hindering her ability to meet licensing requirements. Additionally, relative caregivers are expected to attend licensing trainings when the children have already been placed in their care, although they are not provided with supports to help cover the cost of mileage or child care, impacting their ability to participate in training.
4. Under Section 8A(2)(L) the legislation needs to clarify that all relative caregivers, licensed and unlicensed, ***receive information about, and have access to, local and statewide support groups***. Access to kinship specific support groups is key to creating successful placements. Kinship caregivers are often dealing with extended family issues not experienced by foster families and are in need of support. Additionally, kinship caregivers have raised concern that in attending traditional foster and adoptive parent support groups they are confronted by members "bashing" the biological family of the child, leaving them feeling ostracized.

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<sup>1</sup> DHS August Fact Sheet - [http://michigan.gov/documents/dhs/FIA-FactSheet\\_389389\\_7.pdf?20130924094147](http://michigan.gov/documents/dhs/FIA-FactSheet_389389_7.pdf?20130924094147)

5. Under Section 8A(2)(Q) the legislation needs to clarify that before removal of a child from a kinship caregiver's home, where there is not evidence of mistreatment, that there be substantial work to maintain the placement and a higher administrative review of the replacement is required. In the case of kinship care removals, the children are not just being removed from a caregiver but may be being removed from one of their only long-term sources of support. When removal from the kinship caregiver's home is necessary, the child welfare system should encourage and facilitate the continued relationship between the relative caregiver and the child through visitation, phone calls, letters, etc., when appropriate, to reduce the possibility of additional trauma to the child.
6. Sections 8(A)2(Subsections Q-V) the legislation needs to clarify that these rights extend to all relative placements regardless of whether they are licensed or not. Unlicensed caregivers do not currently have the benefit of training and orientation that educates them about their responsibilities and opportunities as caregivers, therefore they are at even greater risk of not understanding that they are able to give input and have access to service plans and court proceedings, increasing the likelihood that they may unintentionally violate the requirements of a service plan or court order that they have not been informed of or do not fully understand. Relative caregivers, especially those who are unlicensed need additional supports to effectively meet their expectations and responsibilities as caregivers. It is the responsibility of the child welfare system to provide them with the tools and knowledge necessary, regardless of their licensing status.

In closing, I would like to say that while this piece of legislation would be a support to kinship caregivers whose placements are overseen by the Department of Human Services foster and adoption programs, it does nothing to assist the over 19,000 children who are living with grandparents or other relatives who have no ability to access these supports. Children who have disabilities, emotional trauma, and the scars of abuse and neglect. These families are struggling with the same issues and are in need of the same supports as foster families but have been discouraged by the child welfare system. This includes families such as mine that were turned away by Child Protective Services because I had already removed my grandchild from the unsafe environment as well as those relatives who are told by Child Protective Services Workers that they need to obtain guardianship to keep the children out of the foster care system. Families do so, for fear of losing the child to the system forever, with no knowledge of the door they are closing to supportive services. In stepping in to protect these children, these families, MY family is ultimately denied access to services that support foster families and children. And when these families, again MY family, tries to challenge the system in order to obtain needed services for our children or even to give permanency to our children through adoption we are shut down with innuendos that we might lose our children by advocating for them.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you. I will happily answer any questions that you might have. Additionally, I have provided each of you with a written copy of my testimony. Thank you.